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Body Politic: The Emergence of a "*Kwaito* Nation" in South Africa

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Abstract

Kwaito has emerged as one of the most popular music genres in post-apartheid South Africa especially among the black youth. It has been heavily criticized for promoting consumerist values, neoliberal ideology and disregard for the Black struggle. This article offers an alternative reading of *kwaito* and argues that its political and historical awareness is expressed in embodied performance forms that build on earlier township styles. In mixing these styles with contemporary global youth culture fashions, the *kwaito* artists perform a habitus that imitates while remaining distinctly different from the ways and values of their largely middle-class critics. The political import of *kwaito* rests on the disparate sentiments of either attachment or aversion to a "black nation" that the performed imagery evokes among the audiences and observers.

Introduction

Music called *kwaito* emerged in the early 1990s, at the time when the apartheid regime in South Africa was coming to its end and the electorally selected majority rule was taking over. *Kwaito* soon became the country's second most popular music style (after gospel). From the very start *kwaito* has aroused fervently emotional responses: while the young fans love it, the critical voices find much to loathe in it.

Unlike the overtly and covertly political music of the struggle time in the 1970s and 1980s,[1] *kwaito*'s mood is above all, celebratory. It is characterized by the sensibilities of dancing and having fun and the aversion to political preaching. Uninhibited exhibition of beautiful bodies, sexual innuendo, consumption-orientation and a purported lack of understanding of the political history have been the main targets of criticism of *kwaito*. The apparent hedonism and superficiality of the youth are seen as regrettable developments after the politicized era of the struggle.

The criticism is expressed by many academic and popular commentators. In this article I want to study what it is in *kwaito* that moves the township youth but appears as unintelligible and vulgar to its critics. In my view, the distinction has to do with the differential social backgrounds and orientations of the *kwaito* adherents and critics and with the ways in which *kwaito* is inscribed in the local expressive and performance traditions. Hence, the body-, dance- and consumption-orientation that the critical observers take as signs of the youth "being lost" in foreign ways and values, appear in my interpretation as a means of creating a sentiment of familiarity and belonging – resonant of a habitus (Bourdieu) – among the largely township youth.

By situating *kwaito* in a longer performance history than is usual, it is possible to discern the political potential of the dancing body. The emotional fervor that *kwaito* arouses both for and against, reveals that it is more than a meaningless youth culture style. *Kwaito* touches and creates sentiments of inclusion and exclusion among the diverse population factions in the post-apartheid nation under construction. In this sense, regardless of its apolitical or anti-political stance and reputation, *kwaito* has political implications. Comparable to what Askew has shown for other music genres in the context of Tanzania, I argue that national sentiments and

distinctions are enacted and created in *kwaito* performance and its reception. Rather than intentional and strategic, such political sentiments are often emergent and may remain indistinct, but are nevertheless intensively experienced and lived. The *kwaito* performances and music videos give momentum to an imaginary community or nation (Anderson) by combining styles and symbols of local black history with those of the contemporary Black Atlantic (Gilroy).[2]

My own material originates from numerous interviews and informal discussions with artists, producers, DJs, fans, and recording industry representatives, conducted mostly in Johannesburg and Cape Town. The majority of the interviewees appear with their real names; whenever I use a pseudonym, I indicate it as such, and this is when I have promised to protect the anonymity of the interviewee.

Kwaito and the Y youth

Today's youth in South Africa are called the Y generation to distinguish them from the X generation of their parents. In popular and academic literature, certain generalized features are usually associated with the Y youth. These are a perceived focus on partying, consumption, and "stylizing the self" (Nuttall 432). *Kwaito*, hip hop, and house are the music of choice of the Y generation.

In the 1990s, *kwaito*[3] emerged as the most popular and most distinctly local style of these genres. Created by producers and DJs, *kwaito* draws influences from diverse musical sources, such as hip hop, house, techno, ragamuffin, and several earlier forms of South African music, among them *kwela*, *mbaqanga*, *marabi*, and *bubblegum* (Boloka 98-9; Steingo, "South African Music" 336).[4] For *kwaito*, what was original and essential in the adaptation of international

styles, such as house music, was the slowing of the tempo to suit the local taste, as South Africans of the time preferred dancing to the slower beat.[5]

Even though *kwaito* also attracts a white audience, it is considered to be an expressive musical style especially of black youth, and it is usually performed by blacks. *Kwaito* is mostly sung in township lingua franca, which is a mixture of Zulu, Sotho, English, and Afrikaans, and often considered a contemporary version of the gangster language or *tsotsitaal* called *iscamtho*, first developed in the early twentieth century townships (Allen, "Kwaito" 86). The vocal style is called "chanting," usually consisting of a few rhythmically repeated catch phrases instead of lengthy poetry (Steingo, "Politicization" 24). The lyrics are typically about fun, sex, and having a good time. Often, however, because of invented or ambiguous expressions, the lyrics are virtually meaningless or open to many potential meanings.

In the 1990s, *kwaito* rapidly established its popularity in South Africa and many other African countries. Yfm, a radio station established in 1997 and devoted to playing *kwaito*, also quickly became one of the biggest radio stations in the country. Diverse, vibrant new forms of black entrepreneurship have indeed emerged around *kwaito* and the Y youth. Among these are the record labels releasing *kwaito*, house, and hip hop (such as Kalawa Jazmee, 999, and Ghetto Ruff), the youth magazine *Y Mag* and several clothing design labels (such as Stoned Cherrie and Loxion Kulcha).

In 2003, Yfm published a glossy booklet "*Kwaito* nation," written by Gostner. In presenting beautiful, cool, sensual, fashion- and body-conscious young people in sizable, sleek pictures, the booklet represents the expressly celebratory and carefree *kwaito* ambience rather well. The text emphasizes, however, the economic importance of *kwaito*, portraying the many career options it has opened in the music and entertainment industries. The booklet argues that

over nine million adults belonged at the time to the "*kwaito* nation," which is 31% of South Africa's entire adult population (7). This number referred to people for whom *kwaito* is "a way of life," but how this number was arrived at is not disclosed.

Even though it had been presented as an industry analysis and did have some statistical information, the booklet is more like an advertisement rather than research. However, in stamping the hugely popular music style with the word "nation," the pamphlet hints at the political potential of *kwaito*. Imagined, as all communities and nations are (Anderson), the proposed "kwaito nation" is at the same time a bottom-up construction due to being based on mass popularity. Lacking largely self-awareness as a community and an expressed ideology, this is not a nation in the strong sense of the word. However, a kind of nation emerges in the recognition and discovery of common styles and symbols by the audiences in the *kwaito* music and performance. It is on these sentiments of recognition that the potential for political connection and mobilization builds. What is this "kwaito nation" then, and who are the people that belong to it?

According to several academic observers, *kwaito* was initially associated with township locales and township youth, but – as with other Y youth markers – has been shifting towards a more middle-class environment and orientation. Proof of such desire for social upward mobility is found in the relocating and migration of many of the Y youth cultural brands to the Rosebank shopping centre, situated in a largely white suburb of Johannesburg. In the Rosebank mall, a whole section called "Zone" is now dedicated to Y youth; it is home to Yfm, *Y Mag*, Stoned Cherrie, Loxion Kulcha and a number of other youthful clothing, record, and other commodity stores and bars. Because the marketed fashions often display a lavish lifestyle currently beyond the economic reach of many in the Y generation, Y culture has been described as "suburb-

oriented, though largely based in the townships" (Bogatsu 6) or as a "future-oriented language of aspiration" (Nuttall 439). The apparent hedonism of the Y youth has generated a lot of condemnation in South African society.

Many academic commentators are rather critical of *kwaito*. Stephens, for instance, emphasizes the objectification and sexualization of the female body as well as the overall consumerism projected in *kwaito*. He suggests that the misogynist and sexist images of *kwaito* have encouraged violence against, and rapes of, women. Several writers take notice of the lack of authentic resistance in *kwaito*. Thus, for instance, Impey says: "While the *kwaito* movement appeared to adopt the politically defiant posturing of [the earlier] Cape rap and hip hop, in reality, it appropriated defiance as a fashion statement" (cited in Steingo, "Politicization" 26). Comparably, beneath *kwaito*'s street-credible and defiant posture, both Peterson (210) and Steingo detect an acceptance and promotion of the mainstream ethos of consumerism and capitalism ("South African Music" 351).

Peterson draws a parallel between *kwaito* artists and the first generation of the mission-educated African elite "who identified, for a period, with the imperatives of colonial society, desperately seeking to meet the criteria that would allow them entrée into the strongholds of civilization" (210). Both Peterson (211) and Steingo point at the shallow historical sensibility of *kwaito* practitioners. According to Steingo, *kwaito* stars have adopted gold and other luxury commodities as signs of success and a fetish connoting wealth and status ("South African Music" 353). He finds this tragic, because in so doing the young forget about the racist and exploitative history of gold mining. By referring to Derrida, Steingo writes: "*kwaito* artists do not ap-propriate but ex-propriate" [gold as a sign of success]; this is about "losing one's memory in the memory of the other" ("South African Music" 351). With such consumption habits, "*kwaito*

artists are at the forefront of promoting the embrace of mainstream capitalist ideology" (351). Subsequently, according to Steingo, "*kwaito* culture is a symptom (or a casualty) of the disease of apartheid, and also of global violence" ("South African Music" 354). Elsewhere he contends that "*kwaito* represents the internalization of late capitalism and neoliberalism… and the colonization of people's consciousness" ("Politicization" 33). He sees both the entrepreneurial activity and consumerism of the *kwaito* people as congruent with the state's neoliberal policy and ideology of individual achievement, which downplays the actual structural inequality in South Africa.

In these views, *kwaito* adherents appear as victims of false consciousness, as displayed in their hunger for material items and embodied pleasures. The image of consumers duped by the capitalist system is not new; according to the Frankfurt school, for instance, capitalism in general (e.g., Marcuse 5) and culture industries in particular (e.g., Adorno 92) manipulate people to feel and satisfy false needs to the benefit of the system. And the idea of capitalism creating false consciousness was the cornerstone of Marx's thinking already at the end of the nineteenth century.

Opinions comparable with the above views are expressed in the non-academic critical discussion about *kwaito* in South Africa. The views of a record company representative in Johannesburg echoed those of many others as he described the young Y generation artists and entrepreneurs:

> I know those people very well; their hearts are in the right places. They're young black kids who are part of this urban culture, who are trying to make money out of it as well. The new young, black urban elite are everywhere; they have media control and stuff, running

> the labels. I know most of them, they're cool, but there is this… the kind of "show us the money" culture.
>
> We're living in a country where we never used to have very wealthy black people driving around in expensive cars, and that image, that lifestyle, has a very powerful pull. For them it means status, it means empowerment, it means glamour and excitement. Unfortunately it's pretty short-sighted, but we are living in what I call "tata ma chance" culture; take a chance, everybody will take a chance. That tends to be a big thing and it becomes a real problem. Of course they never had any role models, they were all overseas in exile and then suddenly they became this incredibly wealthy – all the attention, all the fame, they had all the money, the drugs, the cars, the girls, everything suddenly on a plate. They didn't know how to deal with it. So there's a huge drug problem, drinking, and car crashes, drama, fighting, breaking things, smashing hotels.
>
> And they're now being wound up by HIV/AIDS… Sex, drugs, and *kwaito*. It's sad because they created something that is completely unique; fantastic dance pop music, wonderful music. I believe if they were listened to by DJs in the States they'd be blown away at the sophistication. And yet they couldn't take it to the next level. They try too much too soon without thinking of the long-term. (Interview, Matthew)

In this description the youth appear to be victims of circumstances, such as the lack of role models and the abundance of all manner of seductions that become attainable too fast and too easily. Moreover, consumerism appears as one symptom of the wider impatient and acquisitive

mind-set of the youth; an overall desirous orientation that itself consumes or devours the young minds and lives.

The previous account comes from a record company representative who is a white middle-class, middle-aged man. But the popular criticism of the Y youth is not limited to the middle-class whites. Black musicians, young and middle-aged who perform in different genres, such as jazz or Afro-jazz, for instance, are scornful especially of what they regard as the lack of musical qualities and ambitions in *kwaito*. One such musician replied to my question regarding his opinion of *kwaito* as follows: "What is *kwaito*? For me it is not music at all" (Interview, Jason).

Many X generation blacks also condemn the youth styles on moral grounds, believing that they portray and promote wrong values and attitudes. Such views were expressed, for instance, by the very famous (now late) artist Jabu Khanyile, who started his career in the 1970s, becoming popular domestically and internationally, especially with bands that mixed jazz and traditional African music. He explained to me that his ambition was always to "preach good gospel," and he continued:

> I do some collaboration with Mandoza and Trompies [*kwaito* artists], but for me it's just giving them some guidance and good messages and make them understand why I do music. Because my motto is to uplift African people and conscientize the black mind and make them really understand themselves… Young want to have fun. But I'm teaching them that you can have fun with a good mind, not have fun with a rough mind. As an adult old person you have to teach the young. (Interview)

Jabu Khanyile thought the current "vulgar music and style" are fed to the youth by TV and other media and that they reflect foreign, especially American styles:

> They want the young to say "fuck, fuck" and they want naked women, but that's not our culture. If we portray our own community in that way it is an insult to ourselves. And I show to that generation that it's politics; politics hasn't ended. The minute you understand those things, you're a highly political person. (Interview)

What is common to the critical discussion on *kwaito* and the Y youth is a shared understanding that the youth are somehow "lost," and being misled by some system or ideology as represented by media, government, or capitalism.[6] The corruptive influence of American values and styles is often mentioned. Moreover, the *kwaito* artists are perceived as not behaving in an adult fashion but acting more like whimsical, irresponsible children.

I do not want to dismiss the factual problems that these discourses address. The above views do reflect the tendency towards excessive lifestyles and the consequent imprisonments and premature deaths of *kwaito* stars, and the overall masculine emphasis in the *kwaito* phenomenon. The shock effect of *kwaito* has been particularly intense also because sensually daring and sexually explicit styles were censored and therefore not seen in the media during the apartheid period. However, earlier popular urban black music and fashion styles, such as *marabi* and jazz, have been similarly reprehended as morally corrupted and "sex-stimulating" in their times (Ansell 110). Is *kwaito* then just another example of youth cultures that always arouse and seek to arouse controversy in society? In order to grasp the specific features of this particular youth

culture phenomenon I want to focus on what it is in the *kwaito* expressive style that attracts the youth. Is it mere imitation, and if so, what are the sources and reasons for imitation?

Mature and immature *kwaito*

The existing academic literature is not unequivocally negative or critical of *kwaito*. The sympathetic views are based on an understanding that *kwaito* fulfills some positive social function regardless of its apparent apolitical and asocial nature. Thus, for instance, both Peterson (197) and Allen observe that *kwaito* is for the township youth a means to express their narratives and dreams, in their own language ("Kwaito" 86-7). Coplan understands *kwaito* to "embody the demand of black urban youth for a new society that fulfills their modernist material aspirations and accepts their pleasure principle as a valid replacement for the now painfully passé politicized ideology of social sacrifice" (20). Nuttall characterizes Y culture as a "refusal of the agony of the social, of the class-based poverty and HIV/AIDS pandemic… [This is] less a denial of 'what's out there' than a cultivated degree of estrangement…This very aspirational matrix might be necessary to a process of cultural refiguration" (451).

Some academic commentators value what they find as a development of a strand of more socially conscious and self-reflexive *kwaito* (Allen "Kwaito" 102; Ballantine 20, cited in Steingo, "Politicization" 30). According to Allen, these artists have started addressing issues of social identities and problems that the politically conscious artists used to deal with in the 1980s. Interestingly, however, my discussions with *kwaito* and house music fans, DJs, producers and artists reveal that they most often appreciate and like the early, "rough" *kwaito* of the 1990s. In their view, after that *kwaito* has become commercialized and streamlined.[7] Many say that they

still like to listen to and play the "old-school *kwaito*" especially. For instance, Mtezman, a music producer and a *kwaito* artist, described the explosive effect that *kwaito* had in the young minds at the end of the 1990s when he came into it: "There was a lot of international house music being played in South Africa at that time. But we identified with *kwaito* because it was sung in our language, and the beat was different; it hit closer to home than any other style of music" (Interview). A poet and music fan Khanyi Mbongwa said about the early *kwaito* that "it was something we [people in the townships] owned and created, outside of whiteness completely. It represented what was happening in the black population post-1994 and the reality of the townships" (Interview). *Kwaito* and house music DJ Charlisko explained that "the 1990s *kwaito* felt like our music. It was about the whole way of expressing yourself and your experiences; it reflected the way we communicate with each other in the township. I still listen to it because of that" (Interview).

According to these people, the early *kwaito* represented the township feel better than the newer one. Steingo is on the pulse of this distinction when he opposes the present "mature *kwaito*" with the earlier, so called "immature *kwaito*" ("Politicization" 30). For Steingo, the difference lies in the way early *kwaito* emphasizes embodiment and non-discursivity. Chanting of bizarre phrases and indulging in bodily pleasures means refusal of the rules of the conventional politics and resistance. In contrast, "mature" *kwaito*, with its emphasis on discursivity, "agrees to play the game of conventional politics" (Steingo "Politicization" 30). Below I wish to study the social and historical associations of the embodied expressions of *kwaito*. This requires returning to the question of who are the people who belong to the so called "*kwaito* nation." What is the position of the *kwaito* discourse and its participants in South African society?

Y youth factions

The existing literature discusses the Y generation as one entity. Bogatsu, for instance, describes Y culture as a "socioeconomically hybrid culture of the *kwaito*/hip-hop generation" (3). However, the young themselves often emphasize divisions between the different orientations within the Y generation. A rather sharp distinction has appeared particularly between *kwaito* and house music, on the one hand, and the hip-hop adherents, on the other.

South African hip-hop artists usually distinguish themselves from the *kwaito* mind-set, especially from its dance- and fun-orientation and emphasize the centrality of the lyrics or the message in hip hop. This message is seldom declaredly political, but rather a sharing of personal and everyday experiences. Nthabi, a young female hip-hop artist calls her music "thinking man's music" and describes it as follows:

> Maybe somebody hurts me and I'll feel like making a song about that. Or I see something that happens in the news and I feel like making a song about that. So it all depends on the kind of mood I'm in and whatever it is that I experienced at that time. If you're willing to take the time out to listen to the words, then it is for you… and it doesn't need to be too deep or too complicated. All it requires you to do is just listen; what you do with the information is totally up to you. (Interview)

Another artist, Teba Shumba recounted how his first record with a group called Skeem in 1996 was influenced by *kwaito* but had more content than the usual *kwaito*: "We introduced more lyrics into the music, it was more innovative than *kwaito*." He explained that they wanted to say

that time for fun is limited. "We sang about alcohol and drug abuse, dealing with issues that were concerning township people" (Interview).

Some hip-hop groups have started to integrate a more dance-based character into their rapping. Yet, even so, meaningful lyrics remain important, as the well-known artist Flabba of the top hip-hop group Skwatta Kamp explained:

> People are tired of hearing about problems; people want to dance, to have fun, want to forget about the struggle…I'd like to think that our music makes sense. It's very conceptual. We make kinds of songs that you can relate to; what you've been through as a human being, what happens to you as you go through… and keeping it real and simple. (Interview)

Interestingly, in contrast to the United States and many other countries, where hip hop is a mode of expression for the less well-off, working-class youth, in South Africa hip-hop artists and audiences are often somewhat more middle-class in their social background and orientation than the *kwaito* youth. Even though it nowadays has its own local flavor, South African hip hop has appropriated more of the American hip-hop styles and outlook than *kwaito*. In contrast, *kwaito* artists and audiences' association with the township remains strong.

A music industry insider Lindelani Mkhize explained the differences between *kwaito* and hip hop in this way:

> Most people in rural areas and townships listen to *kwaito*. People who listen to hip hop are upwardly mobile kids who live in urban areas and who attend cross-kinda[8]

> schools. Hip-hop people are young kids who have cell phones, so they buy air time rather than hip-hop CDs; hip hop is growing, but sales-wise, it's not growing. The township people don't necessarily have cell phones. They still buy cassettes. It's different lifestyles. People who come to the Zone are people who listen to hip hop and jazz. But if you go to Soweto or Southgate, the shops in Southgate sell more *kwaito* than anything; [it's] the mall of the township. (Interview)

As with hip hop, the performers and audiences of jazz and Afro-jazz in South Africa often come from more middle-class backgrounds than those of *kwaito* and do not apportion themselves with the *kwaito* attitude. As was mentioned previously, jazz musicians are often scornful of what they consider to be a lack of musical ambitions and qualities in *kwaito*. One of the most prominent, young female Afro-jazz artists, Simphiwe Dana, described her development and the finding of her own voice and genre by explaining how she was initially part of the "underground" music and poetry scene, where she was offered a chance to become part of a *kwaito* group. She took the opportunity only to find out that she was not a "*kwaito* girl." When replying to my question concerning what she meant by a "*kwaito* girl," she had to search for the words: "well… you know…the dancing, the extrovert type" (Interview).

Local and global moorings of style

Finding oneself comfortable or not with a certain kind of music, or whether one finds a "*kwaito* girl" within oneself or not, are often such immediate feelings that they almost seem instinctual. However, as Bourdieu ("Distinction") has argued, aesthetic dispositions and ability to make

distinctions between pleasing and unpleasing styles belong to cultural capital that is acquired and cultivated, often unintentionally and non-discursively, from early childhood on. Such dispositions shape and show in a person's habitus (Bourdieu, "Outline") – in one's patterns of thinking, demeanor, and taste. Even though socially and culturally acquired, a person's habitus and dispositions are so strongly embodied and internalized that they seem natural to oneself and to others.

I find the concept of habitus applicable to the way South African artists and audiences adopt or dislike different genres, even though I do not subscribe to Bourdieu's emphasis on the social structure as such a determining force on tastes that it leaves little room for individual agency and diversion, and consequently for social change. In South Africa, socioeconomic background has a strong impact on musical and aesthetic taste and style, even though it does not completely determine it. The way the different musical genres are depicted in the local parlance reflects and codifies more inclusive social distinctions; hip hop, jazz, and Afro-jazz are often described with words such as serious, conceptual, and music for listening to whereas *kwaito* is described as light, fun-loving, ephemeral, and music to dance to. The perceived "lightness" of *kwaito* parallels its adherents' lack of social weight and status in the mainstream society, and distinguishes them from the social importance – the "seriousness" – of jazz and hip-hop adherents.

Accusations of the *kwaito* youth's superficiality arise for a large part from their perceived preoccupation with cultivating the surface and the exterior qualities of the person rather than the inner abilities. In the critics' mind, the *kwaito* adherents' focus on bodily enjoyment, fashionable clothes, and expensive cars signals empty-minded and imitative consumerism. The seemingly excessive investment in the outer appearance appears as a flippant preoccupation to the middle-

class critics, who appreciate more sober tastes and degrees of consumption in accordance with one's social state, not excessive in regard to it.

Features and discussions comparable to those of *kwaito* are found in many other youth culture fashions in the African diaspora. The preoccupation with boosting the exterior qualities of the person through conspicuous consumption as well as criticism thereof is found in these cases, too. For instance, hip hop in the USA is often criticized for showiness and excessive materialism, among other things. Diawara compares the flamboyant visibility or what he calls "homeboy cosmopolitanism" of the contemporary hip-hop youth in New York to the black youth's adoption of James Brown styles in West Africa in the 1960s and 70s (239). In Diawara's interpretation, rather than being mindless puppies of market forces, the contemporary black youth understand that markets and consumption are the key sites in the struggle for liberation and advancement today (275). For blacks, the liberating effect is even more intense, as historically their participation in the marketplace has been denied to them.

Several studies done in the African diaspora, for instance in the Caribbean region, likewise emphasize the liberating effect of the adoption and localization of the American youth culture fashions and the concomitant consumerism. For instance, Thomas argues that in Jamaica, hip hop and its "radical consumerism" belong to cultural practices through which lower-class blacks in particular assert their participation in the transnational circles of "modern blackness." Comparable interpretations are given, for instance, by Gordon and Anderson for the hip-hop practices of the Garifuna in Honduras, and by Marshall for Rastafarian rappers in Jamaica. In each case, those who adopt the symbols of "modern, transnational blackness" seek to elevate their status locally, and simultaneously they influence the global styles. Perry emphasizes the performative nature of black popular style, that is, the force of style to articulate and not simply

reflect identities of blackness (643). Sansone, writing about Afro-Brazilian youth, points out that the black-signified youth styles aestheticize blackness and enable redefining black difference in Western societies through style (461). And Niaah describes the overall importance of celebratory performance practices in identity making across the Black Atlantic.

Similarly, in flaunting with extravagant styles and loud fashions the *kwaito* youth draw on the global signs of black coolness and cosmopolitanism and assert their awareness of and belonging to the transatlantic community or the Black Atlantic. But in the South African case, such associations are not new and the ideas and signs of modern blackness are not simply adopted and copied from abroad. Urban South African artists and audiences have already for decades interweaved transatlantic styles with the local ones. The earlier decades' fusions of global and local styles have become part of the social memory. The *kwaito* artists have selected to employ some of these historical style-mixtures in their music and performance, in the process re-signifying them as prime exemplars of the local urban black history and sophistication.

The historicity of the *kwaito* style

Kwaito has grown into a diverse and rich performance mode, as the discussion on "mature" and "immature" strands of it reveals. However, certain regular historical reference points can be found within the diversity. Indeed, even though the critics blame *kwaito* youth for lacking historical and political awareness, much evidence to the contrary can be found in *kwaito* music and performance. The musical influences from several earlier South African genres were already mentioned, such as *marabi* of the 1920s and 1930s, *kwela*, jazz and *mbaqanga* of the 1950s and

1960s, and *bubblegum* of the 1980s. A number of *kwaito* artists have also collaborated with older artists by including them on their records and in performances (Allen, "Kwaito" 102).

Commentary on the historical and political realities is made in a range of embodied rather than linguistic means. For this reason, the performance realm is fundamental for the meaning-making in *kwaito*. The people that I have talked to, often refer to the music videos when making sense of the ambiguous lyrics. In what follows I will analyze some *kwaito* videos for their historical and political references. Most of these come from a DVD collection by Arthur Mafokate (*Arthur – The Best of*), who is one of the earliest and most influential *kwaito* artists.

Many of the video narratives in this DVD take place in a site of tedious manual labor, or in an austere township or inner city environment; that is, places habitual for blacks and coloreds[9] in South Africa. Such sites in the videos include industrial environments and factory yards, abandoned open spaces in city centers, township streets and squatter camps. The main protagonist (usually Arthur himself) or protagonists in the videos are often initially clad in plain uniforms, most commonly in workers' overalls, school uniforms or adapted army camouflage uniforms. The settings' ambience then typically begins to transform into a fantasy or dream world through the sudden donning of luxurious and extravagant clothes by the main character(s) and the introduction of flashy cars, sexy women and skillful dancing. The environment beyond the main characters usually remains unchanged, except for the forlorn passers-by and spectators' faces brightening up and breaking into surprised and enthusiastic smiles as they follow the events.

Other video stories in the collection occur in settings that were previously exclusively or predominantly white spaces. These include the Johannesburg city centre, once the prime location for white business, corporate offices, and homes, where the working blacks were permitted

entrance only with their passes during working hours after which they had to return to the townships. Among these videos is one ("Mnike") where the action takes place interchangeably in a school basketball yard, on the city centre rooftops of Johannesburg, and in a modern TV studio (also in the video "Haai Bo"). One video ("Koti Koti") is shot in Sun City, once a powerful site and symbol of white leisure. In the Sun City video, several of the black female dancers wear blond wigs, while the main female character has silky, long black hair. The latter hairstyle, a hair weave that makes the naturally curly and short black hair long and straight is a sign of modern, urban black sophistication. The former hairstyle, black dancers with blond wigs can be read as a reversal to a character type called "coconut," referring to a person who is black on the surface but white inside. "Coconut" is a derogatory label most often applied to a newly wealthy black person who is perceived to aspire to white lifestyles to the extent of denying his or her background. The blond wigs can thus be interpreted to signal their black wearers' advancement according to the white standards while keeping their inner blackness and values intact.

Another video ("Pule Pule") starts by depicting a man (Arthur) clad in worker's overalls cleaning floors in a dreary corridor. The corridor ultimately leads to the changing room of professional cabaret dancers and out of the blue the cleaning man metamorphosizes into the smartly clad and well-groomed manager of the dancers. The women are shown to be preparing for their performance, changing their clothes and putting on make-up; the close-up camera shots revel in the women's beautiful bodies, faces, dresses and dance steps. The majority of the women are black and colored although some white women appear fleetingly. This might be interpreted as a statement of people of all colors fitting in, in this case, in the same changing room as they purportedly do in a "rainbow nation,"[10] but in a reverse order of importance and frequency to that of the apartheid times.

Altogether the videos in this collection include ample imagery of regimes, spaces and symbols of power and control, and how they are being claimed, adopted or transcended by the (mostly) black township youth. These are powerful images precisely because they draw on historical and political realities and symbols of racial oppression and wealth disparity. Already the spaces portrayed and occupied in the videos are evocative of meaning, because of their profound historical significance. Moreover, as I will elaborate on below, the importance of the videos in creating meaning also lies in the fact that they generate a story and a setting for the otherwise often unintelligible songs and lyrics.

Some of the most popular *kwaito* groups, such as Mafikizolo and Bongo Maffin, employ the images of 1950s Sophiatown in their music, clothing and videos. The township of Sophiatown was established in 1899 to house the new urban black working class and had been destroyed by the regime by 1960. With music and clothing styles adopted from African American jazz and swing bands and from American films, Sophiatown has come to epitomize the early urbane black culture in South Africa. Its flair is re-created, for instance, in Mafikizolo's music video "Kwela," which features the jazz legend Hugh Masekela. The title *kwela* refers to pennywhistle street music of the 1950s, and it also refers to the apartheid-era police command for the blacks to "climb onto" a police van. The people in the music video are dressed in 1950s style and the story tells about a group of young people (the three Mafikizolo singers) and an old man (Hugh Masekela) who have been arrested. In the jail they start dancing and singing about the injustices of the system. The video is interspersed with several clips from old documentary films, depicting the South African police force, the queuing of blacks to be transported by bus to their work, the inspection of their passes by the police, as well as images of the Johannesburg city center and the townships of the 1950s.

For some people, Mafikizolo represents the somewhat more ”mature,” pop-oriented *kwaito,* while Arthur the earlier, rougher brand of it. Both, however, employ older styles and images and the most common reference points are found in the 1950s township life. In addition to the markers already mentioned, the *mapantsula* clothing and dancing style, also initially developed in the 1950s townships, has been integral to the *kwaito* performance from the start. This is an energetic, fast dance of choreographed moves involving improvisation by individual dancers, typically performed in groups or pairs in rather plain clothes, such as shirts, short-legged trousers, caps or floppy hats and sneakers. According to Ansell, by the late 1960s *mapantsula* style had been adopted especially by the working-class township youth in distinction to the more affluent “Ivy League look” (137-8). The *mapantsula* style can be found, for instance, on several tracks in the DVD collection by Arthur Mafokate.[11]

In my view, it is no co-incidence that the 1950s in particular has emerged as a source for stylistic innovations in *kwaito*. The glamorous élan developed in 1950s Sophiatown was a way to transcend the local repressive and parochial political order by drawing on cosmopolitan, American and African American styles. Similarly in *kwaito* today, social and political statements are being made through aesthetic styles and in embodied forms. The fifties styles serve as particularly prominent reference points, because in the social memory that period has come to symbolize the early black urban expressive culture. Real life in Sophiatown was often less glamorous than the constructed myth, but this does not lessen its importance as a living legend and metonym of the local black urban experience (Titlestad 36-7). The styles that in the 1950s were proudly conceived of as American derivations are now used in *kwaito* performance as indexes of local township history.

Kwaito thus builds on earlier township music, fashion and dance styles. Even though sometimes those are featured in their rather pure historical forms, more often than not they are mixed with elements of contemporary international youth culture trends. As for attire, mixings with a strong emphasis on the local history of urban styles are produced by the youth fashion design labels, such as Stoned Cherrie and Loxion Kulcha. For the global youth culture elements, hip-hop fashions are a popular source. The most authentic and expensive of the camouflage and other hip-hop clothes are designed by an African American label FUBU (For Us By Us). The hip-hop fashions are also mixed with the local elements. For instance, instead of the baseball cap, *kwaito* adherents often sport a floppy sun hat, called Spotti, or a *mapantsula* style of cap. According to Swartz, the Spotti is a hat originally used by cricket players when fielding and as such has its roots in the British colonization and white elite culture (27). Another staple of *kwaito* street style are sneakers (or takkies as they are usually called in South Africa); canvas shoes called All Stars. These are locally produced imitation shoes of an American brand whose popularity in the US has waned (ibid.). Both unbranded Spottis and All Star sneakers can be bought relatively cheaply in South Africa. In wearing them the *kwaito* youth are not trying to become part of a British- or American-originated elite culture; instead, they are adopting the items into their own style and giving them new meanings. Indeed, I often heard the young maintain that the Spotti derives from the earlier decades' township gangster style.

Even though terrifying in their modus operandi, the township gangsters of the 1950s, the *tsotsis*, were admired for their aesthetic styles and behavioral coolness. The *tsotsi* styles are frequently factored into the *kwaito* videos and performances (see Mafikizolo, and Mafokate). The whole predilection of the *kwaito* artists and producers to establish their own record labels and other business ventures in the post-apartheid society can also be seen as a manifestation and

continuation of a historically longer, hustling *tsotsi* attitude; that of finding one's own means rather than working for an establishment (see Bogatsu 10; Peterson 208).[12]

In addition to clothing and dancing, the *kwaito* mode of singing or chanting is itself strongly embodied. This comes out in the way that practically every word is accompanied by a certain gesture or a grimace. According to my interviewees, this is an essential feature in the township parlance, which *kwaito* builds and adds on.[13] Many of the interviewees liked the fact that the lyrics lend themselves to multiple potential meanings rather than one explicit message. According to Satyo, playfulness and innovation of ever new expressions are indeed key features of *kwaito*-speak. Code-switching is prevalent, whereby fragments of words from different languages are combined, often within the confines of a single word (Satyo, "Linguistic Study" 98). Displaying and battling in street-cleverness through linguistic performance is a central charm of *kwaito* and reflects the township communication.

Kwaito performance and music videos are thus vital in evoking meaning for, and a story of, the often obscure lyrics. In this sense, too, the discursive realm is subjected to the embodied performance realm; the lyrics are made meaningful and intelligible only through performance and do not initially carry meaning independent of, and above it. Once they have been popularized through performance, the new words and phrases often become absorbed into street vernacular.

Dancing politics

In recent years, *kwaito* has been drawn into the political arena. Steingo writes about the appropriation of *kwaito* by persons and parties across the political spectrum, from the ANC and

(the now former) President Mbeki to the New National Party (NNP), and the Democratic Alliance (DA) and its leader Tony Leon ("Politicization" 34-7). For Steingo, such conviviality between *kwaito* artists and politicians marks the end of conventional politics and its replacement by the rules of late capitalism and neoliberalism. He maintains that *kwaito* embodies the neoliberalist ideology and spirit and therefore well suits the purposes of the current politicians, who rather dance and party than discuss real politics: *kwaito* sets the tune for the end of politics or the "non-political politics" ("Politicization" 34-5, 39).

The political employment of *kwaito* music and dance is certainly a populist move, which may reflect weakness in the real substance of the politics. However, rather than interpreting *kwaito* as an embodiment of post-apartheid neoliberal policies, I associate it with a much longer traditions of political expression and resistance, typically conveyed in embodied forms – by dancing and singing – by marginalized people, and blacks especially in South Africa.

For instance, during the apartheid era, the *isicathamiya* performance competitions that the lower-rank black migrant laborers organized during the weekend nights were a way to construct alternative spaces and orders to the daytime hegemonic command (Erlmann). Although not expressly political, the performance practice created an emancipatory space and sentiment that challenged the apartheid order (Erlmann 135). As the struggle against apartheid intensified, the opposition was forcefully expressed and spread among the freedom fighters and the ordinary people through liberation songs and a specific stomping, military march dance style, called *toyi-toying*. Recently, President Jacob Zuma has successfully employed the popular memory of the struggle songs and dances in his politics, which appeals particularly to the common people whose economic position and social services the post-apartheid government has failed to improve (Gunner 38).[14] Increased economic polarization and disparity in political power between

the black upper- and middle-class and the poor blacks has made the latter responsive to Zuma's political call, in which song and dance play a central role.

Jacob Zuma and other contemporary politicians draw on the social memory of the embodied mode of resistance and emancipation in mobilizing people who are disillusioned and disappointed with the post-apartheid politics and its unfulfilled promises. These are undoubtedly populist moves, but the interesting question for me is why such calls resonate so strongly with certain parts of the population. The popularity of *kwaito* and subsequently the reason for it lending itself to a means of political mobilization lay importantly in its historicity, in the ways it continues and renews the performance traditions. Recognizing styles and features as one's own and simultaneously as renewed by linkages to contemporary transatlantic fashions incites sentiments of belonging to a predominantly black (*kwaito*) nation. As Askew has argued in the case of Tanzania, music and dance performance are a central means for imagining a nation and negotiating social and political hierarchies in South Africa, as well.

Conclusion

I have attempted to offer an alternative reading of *kwaito* to its critics. Contrary to the views of *kwaito* as a historically and politically shallow expressive form, I have emphasized the historical and political references that are expressed in embodied and performed forms. This kind of emphasis on the non-discursive aspects of communication makes *kwaito* expression unintelligible to its critics whose understanding of the criteria for the credibility of a person and message tends to represent more middle-class styles and values.

Another key topic in the criticism of *kwaito* has been its apparent orientation towards consumption. *Kwaito* artists and fans are reprimanded for adopting and promoting values foreign and harmful to them and for the society at large. These values are often regarded by the critics as capitalist and/ or American. However, adopting and parading symbols of status and wealth, as displayed for instance by luxurious cars and extravagant attire, does not yet mean the adoption of a capitalist or neoliberalist ideology. I have suggested that it may build on a different understanding of the constitution of the person, in which exteriorization of one's abilities and social relationships is essential. Similar emphasis on public display is found in some other youth culture fashions in the African diaspora. The transatlantic stylistic trends have been and remain an important source for fashioning urbane black identities in South Africa. Yet they are always mixed with what are or have become conceived of as local styles and emblems. In contrast to what the critics claim, *kwaito* conveys layers of social memory in its musical and performance forms.

The moral reprehension of Africans' adoption of higher-class and cosmopolitan fashions has long roots. Africans' receptivity to European clothing and other consumer items is detected already in older missionary and colonial records in South Africa and many other parts of the continent. In many cases Africans were relatively fast in finding Western commodities, and clothing especially, as a way to mark and make social distinctions and enhance their status (e.g., Comaroff and Comaroff; Hay 257). The fact that Africans did not always adopt Western clothes in what was considered to be a proper way raised both amusement and irritation among the missionaries and other colonial settlers. The tendency of spending considerable sums of money on fancy clothes was disapprovingly noted, for instance, by the missionaries working among the South African Tswana in the nineteenth century (Comaroff and Comaroff 242). The Africans'

unconventional ways of wearing European clothes and their ways of blending elements of European and indigenous clothing was often also considered to be improper (266). Comparably, in Cameroon Grassfields at the turn of the nineteenth century, King Njoya's adoption and production of German-type military uniforms for his soldiers first caused amusement but eventually led to punitive measures by the Germans (Geary). These and many other cases reveal the Africans' understanding of power inherent in clothing and imitation, and given the reaction of the Europeans, this association apparently did not escape their perception.

Imitation of foreign ways, such as the adoption of foreign clothing, thus cannot be straightforwardly interpreted as a mindless or submissive act of copying, of trying to become like the imitated other. Michael Taussig has argued in another context that copying is a way of incorporating and absorbing the imitated Other and its power to oneself. For the Cuna Indians in Panama that Taussig discusses, healing requires combining European and indigenous powers; this is depicted in the wooden curing figurines, whose outside is carved as an imitation of colonial Europeans while the inner substance is conceived of as being Indian (186, 191-2). This can be compared to the previously analyzed music video of Arthur Mafokate, where black dancers wear blond wigs.

Indeed, the *kwaito* adherents combine and draw from several sources of power in mixing elements from historical and ethnic clothing and blending the nostalgic Sophiatown and *mapantsula* styles with contemporary Western status symbols and African American hip-hop fashions. Rather than signaling the adoption of capitalist or neoliberalist or consumerist or American values, it is better conceived of as an act of adding powerful other peoples' and periods' symbols in one's own self-constitution and self-presentation and as such, an act of claiming status and power. Due to such fusion of styles and status symbols, the *kwaito* youth do

not appear merely as utterly different but – in sporting desired consumer items – as provokingly similar to the middle-classes. In encompassing several powerful styles, *kwaito* youth's way of performing their habitus is not merely reproductive of their pre-existing social class and status (Bourdieu), but potentially socially transformative. That the aim is not to become like the imitated other, but only to usurp some of their status and power while remaining different, makes *kwaito* expression inherently political. Combining local and global styles many of which are signified as black gives momentum to imagining a certain kind of a black nation. The emotional fervor of the *kwaito* criticism conveys that this political dimension is perhaps perceived also by the critics. The criticism thus not only reflects disparate tastes but also the anxieties that the embodied politics of *kwaito* raises in parts of the body politic.

Notes

[1] About political criticism in the music of the earlier decades, see e.g. Allen ("Commerce, Politics"), and Ansell.

[2] When writing about people, I will use the terms white, black and colored with lowercase letters, even though I acknowledge that these labels are social constructions created by the apartheid regime to artificially classify and differentiate people. On this, see also the note number 9. For established concepts, such as Gilroy's Black Atlantic, I will use uppercase letters.

[3] The exact origins of the word *kwaito* are unclear. Most commonly it is thought to derive from the Afrikaans slang word *kwaai,* meaning hip, hot, cool or vicious. It may also come from the name of a group of township gangsters, AmaKwaitos (Satyo, "Kwaito-Speak" 139; Steingo, "South African Music" 339-40; Stephens 256). In any case the term and the musical style were developed in Johannesburg region, where Afrikaans is one ingredient of the township lingo *iscamtho*.

[4] For the specifically South African elements in *kwaito*, see e.g., Allen ("Kwaito versus Crossed-Over" 90) and Stephens (264).

[5] Today *kwaito*'s cadence is faster than in the 1990s. House music has increased its popularity among the youth, and house music elements have become more prominent in *kwaito,* too. House and *kwaito* share much in their sensibility, as both are essentially dance music and strongly associated with the township youth. Indeed, many artists and fans do not see the two as distinct genres, but say that they are alike (see also Steingo, "Preface" 10). Therefore, in this article I will not delve into the specific distinctions between *kwaito*

and house music. I will use the word *kwaito,* because that is the label used by most of my interviewees and the researchers that I discuss.

[6] For instance, Peterson writes about *kwaito* youth as "the so called lost generation" (200). In South Africa, the term "lost generation" has been used also in another sense for the X generation, referring to those who took part in the struggle and boycotted schools and therefore lack education and position in the contemporary society.

[7] For instance, personal interviews with the *kwaito* artist and producer Mtezman, DJ Charlisko, poet Khanyi Mbongwa, and music fan and event organizer Zenande.

[8] This refers to racially mixed schools, distinct from exclusively black township schools.

[9] The apartheid regime created the population categories of African, Colored, Indian/Asian and White. "Colored" refers to people of mixed descent, distinguished from "blacks," because they were perceived to have lighter complexion and straighter hair. They are the result of diverse mixtures of peoples, such as the white settlers, the Khoisan and Xhosa populations, and the slaves imported from other parts of Africa and some islands of the Indian and Atlantic oceans.

[10] "Rainbow nation" is a term originally coined by the archbishop Desmond Tutu and elaborated on by the president Nelson Mandela to describe and celebrate the post-apartheid nation that encompasses a diversity of ethnic groups and cultures living peacefully together.

[11] See, for instance, the videos of the songs "Inja" and "Dlala DJ".

[12] On the changes in the South African music industry in the post-apartheid era, see Pietilä.

[13] For instance, interviews with Mtezman, DJ Charlisko, and DJ Mandi.

[14] Particularly successful and popular has become Zuma's adoption of the song *umshini wami* (my machine gun). It is a powerful vehicle for expressing popular dissatisfaction with the governance, because it raises memories of the pre-1994 struggle and liberation songs (Gunner 38). On this topic, see also Tolsi and Agencies at http://www.mg.co.za/article/2009-04-22-zuma-votes-to-strains-of-umshini-wami

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